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### EMPOWERING REFUGEES WITH TECHNOLOGY: BEST PRACTICES AND RESEARCH AGENDA

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# EMPOWERING REFUGEES WITH TECHNOLOGY: BEST PRACTICES AND RESEARCH AGENDA

## *Panels*

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## **1 Introduction and Motivation**

ICT is reshaping our lives not only under normal circumstances, but increasingly so in crisis situations. Indeed, the current refugee crisis in Europe is distinguished by the high usage of ICTs by asylum seekers. Particularly, smartphones have emerged as an instrumental piece of technology for refugees, guiding them along their journey through Europe and helping them to build new lives in the host country. This unprecedented reliance of refugees on technology has motivated us to organize an ECIS panel with the goal of (1) formulating a research agenda to investigate this phenomenon on a deeper level, as well as; (2) deriving best practices on how technology can be leveraged to bring about integration and social inclusion. In this sense, our panel proposal builds on and expands the insights that have been gained during a previous panel “Leveraging Technology for Refugee Integration: How Can We Help” organized at ICIS 2016 in Dublin (AbuJarour et al., 2016). While the ICIS 2016 panel has yielded fruitful findings on a broad range of technological initiatives that could be undertaken to integrate refugees, there is a pressing need to continue this dialogue with experts in the field to carve out a coherent research agenda and derive best practices. To achieve these goals, panelists have been carefully selected to fit the scope of this panel, including scholars with expertise in e-government, social inclusion, ICT adoption and refugee integration. Most importantly, participating panelists represent diversity in backgrounds, opinions and geographical regions.

## **2 Issues to be Discussed**

The role of technology in promoting social inclusion and integration has always been an important topic in the Information Systems community. For example, Trauth and Howcroft (2006) argued that ICTs can aid in bridging the gaps of social inclusion in the refugee context. Research interest in this area has further gained momentum recently in light of the current refugee crisis. Indeed, modern refugees rely on technology (esp. smartphones) to communicate with families and friends they have left behind, to access geo-location services, as well as to learn the language, norms and culture of the host country. For many refugees, smartphones represent the only information access point at their disposal. As refugees navigate through the complexities of bureaucratic and socio-economic structures, they encounter three major groups of stakeholders – (1) local government and public authorities, (2) local population, as well as (3) businesses – who, together, constitute their new eco-system (see Figure 1).

Given that communication with different groups of stakeholders implies different goals, refugees are expected to appropriate technological affordances in different ways. Taking this stakeholder-oriented perspective, our panel proposal centers on three major issues as detailed below.

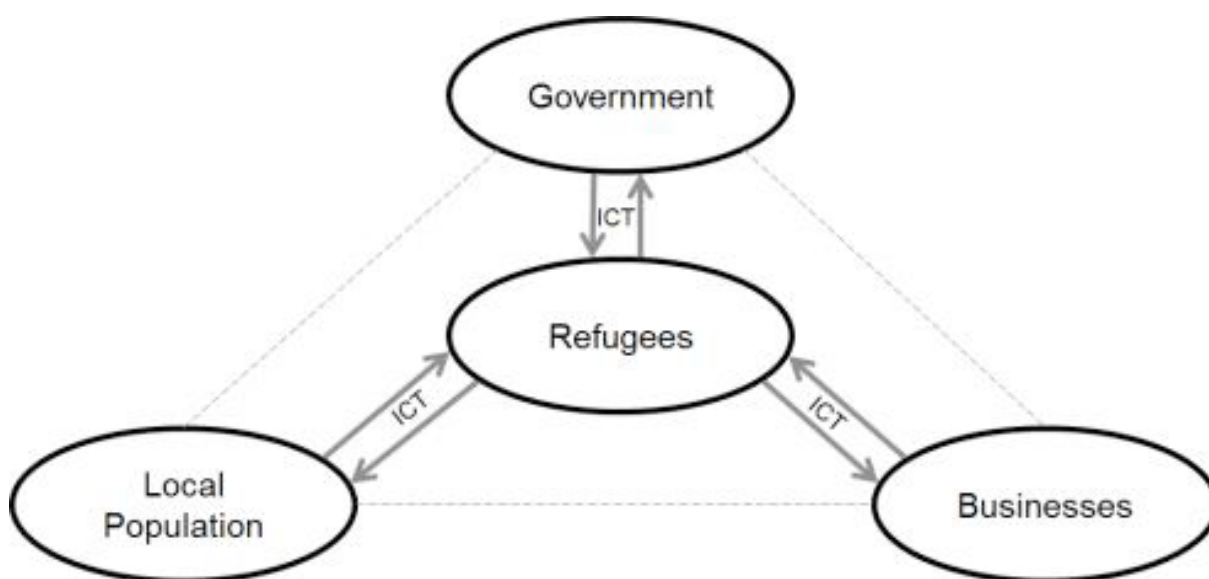


Figure 1: Role of Technology in Addressing Stakeholders' Needs

## Block 1: Role of Technology in Supporting Refugees' Interaction with Governments

Communication with local government and/or public authorities is a critical first step of the asylum process. Upon arrival, refugees have to go through a series of procedures at various governmental institutions to start the asylum applications and other formalities, which include acquiring a residence permit, getting health insurance and securing accommodations, among others. Since most refugees do not speak the local language, they face major difficulties in their face-to-face communication with government representatives. Moreover, most of the relevant websites do not offer information in languages other than the local ones. In fact, cultural adaptation of the governmental websites is almost non-existent, with the design of citizen-centric websites remaining an elusive problem (Tan et al., 2013). Confronted with this situation, refugees creatively resort to technology to connect with authorities (Díaz Andrade and Doolin, 2016). Examples include the use of online dictionaries, speech recognition translators and email communication, just to name a few (AbuJarour et al., 2016). Conceivably, many of refugee needs in this area still have to be addressed. Against this backdrop, we propose to discuss the following issues during the panel:

**Best Practices and Challenges:** What are the solutions that have been proven to be viable in enhancing the communication of refugees with the government? How can technology ease the collaboration of volunteers and governmental agencies? Can research on intercultural user experience help to improve e-government solutions for refugees (e.g., to eliminate bureaucratic red-tape)? What are the challenges encountered by governments in offering e-services (e.g., privacy issues and surveillance)? How prepared are governmental agencies in accommodating refugees' ICT-mediated communication practices? Which processes are best suited for automation? Where are the limits of technology when it comes to refugee-government interactions? How can technology be leveraged to consolidate information and knowledge from numerous governmental agencies for refugees?

Research Agenda: How are ICTs implicated in the interaction between governmental agencies and refugees? What are our assumptions about ICT use by refugees and how do these assumptions correspond with practice? What are refugee's perceptions in relation to government services designed to cater to their specific needs? What role can ICTs play at different stages of the refugee experience (e.g., traveling to the host country, settling in and building a life in the host country); and for different categories of refugees (e.g., women, adolescents and seniors)? What role do ICTs play in aiding refugees to maintain contact with family and friends residing in their country of origin? How can refugees harness ICTs to become active participants of the public sphere in their host country?

## **Block 2: Role of Technology in Supporting Refugees' Interaction with the Local Population**

Finding common ground and building new friendships in a culturally distinct society is a daunting process. Here, ICTs can help refugees and locals to get to know each other in a specific context, thereby culminating in greater social inclusion. For example, the 'www.start-with-a-friend.de' initiative facilitates personal encounters between refugees and locals, viewing it as the first step to socially integrate refugees by exposing

them to employment opportunities and the local language. Nonetheless, the number of existing initiatives is still limited, with many initiatives failing to cater to the specifics of refugees' situation, needs and interests. Against this backdrop, we propose to discuss the following issues during the panel:

Best Practices and Challenges: What are the opportunities and challenges of leveraging technology to support communication between refugees and local population? Which existing initiative(s) seems to work better in connecting refugees and locals and why? What are the distinguishing features of these initiatives? How can ICTs facilitate better understanding of the host society, its traditions and social practices? To what extent can ICTs be deployed to transfer tacit cultural knowledge? How can ICTs be utilized to establish linkages between refugee communities and local organizations? How can ICTs aid in comprehending and promoting the participation of refugees in the civic and political spheres of the host country?

Research Agenda: How can ICTs be employed to sustain the cultural identity of refugee communities and simultaneously assist in their integration in their host country? What impact can technology have on the long-term integration of refugees (e.g., provision of interactive platforms to bridge refugee communities with the local population)?

## **Block 3: Role of Technology in Supporting Refugees' Interaction with Businesses**

Employment is a key determinant and indicator of integration success because being able to work enables refugee to become economically independent, to envision a future, and to meet members of the host society. Furthermore, employment allows refugees to further develop their language skills, enhances self-esteem and well-being, and encourages self-reliance (e.g., Ager and Strang, 2008; Mesthenos and Ioannidi, 2002). Therefore, it is recommended that businesses develop specialized programs that specifically target refugees in order to shape their skills and qualifications to fit the job market in the host society. A number of initiatives serving this purpose have already emerged in Germany. For instance, the initiative 'Engaging for Refugees: Integration via Employment and Education' was introduced by SAP Germany in 2015 to bolster refugees' competitiveness in the German labor market with a level of training comparable to native applicants (Bhattacharjee, 2017). However, despite a rising number of initiatives, there are still many obstacles to overcome. For instance, many refugees struggle with the recognition of their qualification. Furthermore, stipulations for issuing work permits remains ambiguous, with many refugees being forced to wait for over a year to complete their asylum application and receive a work permit (Ager and Strang, 2008). Against this backdrop, we propose to discuss the following issues during the panel:

- **Best Practices and Challenges:** What are the opportunities and challenges of leveraging technology to support refugees in exploring employment opportunities? How can refugees draw on ICTs to participate in economic activities in their host country? How can businesses harness ICTs, including mobile applications and social media, to optimize matching of refugees' skill proficiencies with available job vacancies?
- **Research Agenda:** How can refugees realize the potential of ICTs in managing their daily lives (e.g., access to banking services, setting up entrepreneurship ventures and trading online)? What role can technology play in motivating refugees to compete in the job market of their host country?
- **Expected Outcomes:** We expect to derive a list of best practices that can be translated into guidelines for technology-driven refugee integration by various stakeholders. Furthermore, building on our panel discussion, we aim to devise a research agenda that accentuates the role of technology in bringing about the social integration of refugees.

### 3 Panel Structure

The panel will include one moderator and six panelists. The 1.5-hour panel is intended to be an open dialogue between the panelists and the audience. The moderator will begin by introducing the panelists as well as presenting the goals and topics of the panel. The discussion will commence right after. Throughout the discussion, panelists will share their views on the topic, and the audience is invited to ask questions and share opinions. Finally, the moderator will summarize the key findings that emerged during the discussion.

### 4 Panellists

- **Hanna Krasnova** – Moderator: Hanna is a Full Professor in Business informatics, especially Social Media and Data Sciences, at the University of Potsdam in Germany. She is the author of over 45 research articles published in the ISR, JIT, JSIS and other peer-reviewed outlets. In her research, she addresses the issues of social, individual and enterprise value of the emerging Social Media applications. Among others, her research is dedicated towards finding ways of mitigating harmful consequences and promoting beneficial uses of new Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) by vulnerable population groups (e.g. adolescents, silver surfers, refugees).
- **Safa'a AbuJarour** – Panelist: Safa'a is a doctoral candidate at the department of Business Informatics at the University of Potsdam in Germany. In her research, she investigates the use of ICTs by the refugees in Germany. Specifically, she focuses on finding new technology solutions for enhancing interconnectedness of the newcomers and locals in a host society. Since 2015 Safa'a has been actively engaged as a volunteer in handling the refugee crisis in Berlin. She is also a founder of the non-profit initiative "Place4Refugees" that matches local population with refugees in their search for places to stay. Considering her research and volunteer background, she has a deep understanding of the needs of refugees with regard to technology and integration. She firmly believes that ICTs can play a crucial role in the integration process of the refugees.
- **Antonio Díaz Andrade** – Panelist: Antonio is an Associate Professor of Business Information Systems and Head of the Business Information Systems Department at Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand. Antonio is actively involved with the information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) research community as an author, presenter, lecturer and reviewer. He has strong research interest in the interplay between the social and the technical, especially in the area of ICT4D, as well as in research methods. His research article "Information and Communication Technology and the Social In-

clusion of Refugees” is significant for the discussion of our panel by providing insights on what refugees are actually able to do and achieve with ICTs.

- **Sebastian Olbrich** – Panelist: Sebastian is Professor of Information Systems and Digital Business at the European Business School (EBS) in Östrich-Winkel, Germany. His main interest is the knowledge transfer between IS theory and practice. He is currently involved in a project of German and Turkish federal administration concerning the registration of refugees. This project focuses on the integration into the local job market and therefore emphasizes the role of education and (re-)qualification. Sebastian will share insights of his project experience arguing for the centrality of current measures for long-term integration. In order to deliver sound research results, Sebastian is convinced that political statements and demands should be kept out of the academic discussion; and that this research topic should be rigorously investigated.
- **Chee-Wee Tan** – Panelist: Chee-Wee is a Professor in the Department of IT Management at Copenhagen Business School, Denmark. He currently serves as an Associate Editor for MISQ. He has articles published in MISQ, ISR, JASIST, EJIS and DSS among others. His research focuses on design and innovation issues related to the delivery of digital services to streamline government-citizen interactions, which is of particular interest considering the issues refugees face. He has been doing research work on discovering how citizen-centric e-government services can be designed to benefit public stakeholders.
- **Cathy Urquhart** – Panelist: Cathy is a Professor at the Business School of the Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. She is an Associate Editor for Information Technology and Development. She has published in IS journals like JIT, EJIS, ISJ among others. Her research centers round the use of digital innovation for societal good. Her central thesis is that ICTs have a critical role to play in increasing human and social capital and lifting people out of poverty. We will discuss with her how social media and all forms of ICTs can help us meet societal challenges, such as individual well-being and social justice.
- **Manuel Wiese** – Panelist: Manuel is a postdoctoral researcher at the Chair for Information Systems, Technische Universität München (TUM), Munich, Germany. He graduated in Information Systems from Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster, Germany and holds a doctoral degree in Information Systems from the Technische Universität München. His current research experiences and interests include project management, IT services, and platform ecosystems. He is co-founder of the non-profit organization “Tür an Tür Digital Factory” with one of their projects being “Integreat”, an application that provides refugees with information they need to settle in the host country.

## 5 Target Audience

- IS researchers and doctoral candidates, who are interested in the topics of social inclusion, ICT adoption, e-government and refugee integration
- Multiple stakeholders, including industry partners, governmental offices and NGO members
- Fundraisers keen to financially support projects and parties in alleviating the current crisis

## 6 Suitability to ECIS Audience

Our panel will contribute to an in-depth appreciation of the effects of ICTs on the social inclusion and integration of refugees. It is therefore positioned within the domain of the Bright ICT Initiative – a set of concerted research directions enacted by the AIS to achieve greater impact of the IS discipline (Lee, 2015). This is because uncovering beneficial uses of mobile applications, social media and other ICTs is the first step in promoting the bright sides of existing technologies in integrating refugees both economically and socially. Pragmatically, our discussion may advise governments, businesses, locals, and

other stakeholders in their efforts towards a ‘smart, sustainable and inclusive world’ – an overarching theme of ECIS 2017.

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## Prior experience of the proposers in panel organisation

The moderator, Hanna Krasnova, has extended experience in moderating panels. Moreover, every member of the panel has solid experience in proposing and participating in panel discussions. Examples include:

- AbuJarour, S., Krasnova, H., Wenninger, H., Fedorowicz, J., Olbrich, S., Tan, C.-W., Urquhart, C. and Venkatesh, V. (2016). “Leveraging Technology for Refugee Integration: How Can We Help?” Panel Paper, International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS 2016). Vol. 37.
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